

**OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN BURNS
COMMUNICATIONS SUBCMTE. HEARING ON
THE E-911 ACT OF 1999
MAY 12, 1999**

We often deal with critical issues in this Subcommittee, but today's hearing is on a topic that literally can mean the difference between life or death: e-9-1-1.

Over seventy million Americans carry wireless telephones. Many carry them for safety reasons. People count on those phones to be their lifelines in emergencies. In fact, 98,000 people are counting on their wireless phones in emergencies everyday. That is how many wireless 9-1-1 calls are made a day, 98,000. A parent driving down an interstate highway with the babies in the back seat draws comfort from knowing that, if the car is involved in a crash, he or she can call 9-1-1 for help and an ambulance will be rolling in seconds. An older American driving alone on a long trip feels safer knowing that, if an accident occurs or sudden illness strikes, he or she can use the wireless phone to dial 9-1-1 for help and the State police will be on the way.

But there's a problem. In many parts of our country, when the frantic parent or the suddenly disabled older person punches 9-1-1 on the wireless phone, nothing happens. In those locations, 9-1-1 is not the emergency number. The ambulance and the police won't be coming. You may be facing a terrible emergency, but you're on your own, because you don't know the local number to call for emergencies.

"The E-911 Act of 1999" will help fix that problem by making 9-1-1 the number to call in an emergency -- anytime, everywhere. The rule in America ought to be uniform and simple -- if you have an emergency, wherever you are, dial 9-1-1.

More and more, wireless communications is the critical link that can help get emergency medical care to those in the "golden hour" when timely care can mean the difference between life and death. The 9-1-1 bill will save lives by doing three things.

First, it directs the Federal Communications Commission to designate 9-1-1 as the universal emergency telephone number. The FCC also would provide technical support to the States to help them implement a comprehensive, end-to-end emergency communications infrastructure.

Second, the bill establishes similar treatment between the wireless and wireline communications industries in protection from liability for the provision of telephone services and in the use of 9-1-1 service. The bill gives wireless providers of telephone service the same protection from liability as local exchange companies receive in handling emergency calls. This will help put wireless and wireline carriers on equal footing when it comes to legal liability, ensuring that our new technologies have similar protection as our older ones. It's a matter of fairness. It also ensures that the Public Safety Answering Points that handle 9-1-1 calls have the same protections from liability in handling wireless calls as they have with wireline calls. This too is a matter of fairness as we will soon hear from Mark Wildey. Mark is an emergency 911 dispatch official from Littleton, Colorado, site of the tragic shooting at Columbine High School that left 15 dead and 23 injured. Mark will share his first hand knowledge of how the students and others under siege relied on their mobile phones to call for help.

Third and last, the bill authorizes disclosure of call location information concerning the user of a commercial mobile service in three circumstances. A communications carrier can disclose location information if the customer authorizes the disclosure, or the information is transmitted as part of an automatic crash notification system, or if the disclosure is made to emergency response personnel to enable them to respond to an emergency call from the user.

Now, I want to say something about what this bill does not do. Members of the Subcommittee will note that the bill, unlike its predecessor S. 2519 in the last Congress, does not address the questions of siting of wireless antennas on Federal property, research and development on automatic crash notification systems. The provisions in last year's bill regarding siting of wireless antennas on Federal property drew concerns from representatives of States and localities. They feared that the provision might somehow alter the delicate balance on State and local zoning authority that was struck in telecommunications legislation enacted in 1993 and 1996. It was not then, and is not now, our intention to change that delicate balance, and to avoid the risk of any misperception on that score, this bill does not include the provision regarding siting of wireless antennas on Federal agencies.

This year's 9-1-1 bill is simple -- it makes 9-1-1 the universal emergency number, provides for equal protection of wireless and wireline carriers, and authorizes disclosure of the location of emergency callers. This bill will help save lives and is supported by a broad range of public safety, emergency medical, consumer and citizen groups. These groups represent the operators and users of the 9-1-1 system, those with direct experience with the problems with today's system. We look forward to hearing from today's witnesses on this important legislation.